

School Committee Meeting Minutes
Lura A. White
March 9, 2004

Present: Donald Parker, Chairperson
Paul Wilson
Gary Bourassa
Hugh Muffoletto
Bob Prescott

Also Present: Dr. Thomas Scott, Superintendent
Patricia Stern, Business Manager
Suzanne Mahoney, Elementary Principal
Thomas Walsh, SPED director
Sylvia Jordan, Middle School Principal
Cathy Nacke, Teacher
Shelly Guarino, Teacher
Bill Higgins

The meeting was called to order at 7:04 p.m.

Public Participation:

As there was no public participation the meeting moved to discuss old business.

Paul Wilson motioned to approve the minutes of February 10, 2004. Motion was seconded and approved.

Patricia Stern reviewed Payables Warrants 436 & 438. She also reviewed Payroll Warrants 831, 331, 833 and 831.

Patricia Stern briefed the committee on the Financial Statement. She stated that the members have been presented with a more simplified version to provide as much information as possible. Mrs. Stern reviewed the operational budget, money approved at Town Meeting. This budget includes local taxation and state aid, school choice revenue and expenditures, Devens revolving account, Medicaid and SPED Circuit Breaker monies. Mrs. Stern has taken this budget and deducted all expenditures, encumbrances and projected encumbrances (those not currently on the books). She was then able to project an estimated year end balance of \$51,886.97. She stressed that this is a conservative estimate.

In turning to the transportation budget, Mrs. Stern stated that there is a significant problem. We do not receive any transportation money from state aid; all money is from local taxation. Once expenditures, encumbrances and projected encumbrances have been deducted there is an anticipated deficit of 120,344.25. When asked for a reason for this deficit both Mrs. Stern and SPED Director Tom Walsh indicated that the cost for transporting SPED students to out-of-district placement is the major contributing factor. We are currently contracted with MART and are in the process of looking into a more cost effective way to transport these students. There is a possibility of transporting with other communities in an effort to reduce cost.

Another factor contributing to this situation is the Circuit Breaker funding which helps fund out-of-district placement. This funding is currently fluctuating and therefore hard to anticipate what amount the school district will receive.

Another area of concern was the amount of money we will receive for school choice. As of a December 2003 report the per pupil reimbursement rate was based on FY03 numbers. Dr. Scott hopes to receive an updated report using the current per pupil rate.

Mr. Muffoletto asked to receive a copy of the information that was used to determine the current financial statement. Mrs. Stern will have that information available for him at a future meeting.

In other business Mr. Muffoletto inquired about the new SPED teacher hired at Shirley Middle School. Dave Pedreschi was hired to fill that position. Mrs. Jordan informed the committee that he is not a certified SPED teacher. Mr. Pedreschi is currently enrolled at Fitchburg State College and expects to achieve his Masters Degree in the fall. Mr. Pedreschi has previously worked for the school and among the four candidates that were most qualified, he was the best choice for the position. The parents of the SPED students he is working with have been notified of his qualifications.

Mrs. Stern asked that the committee review the contracts that have gone out to bid. Mrs. Stern recommended that BFI Waste Services receive the contract for waste disposal at all schools. This would be a change in vendor from our current vendor. Mr. Muffoletto motioned to approve this bid award. Mr. Prescott seconded the motion. It is noted that Mr. Wilson abstained from voting due to a conflict of interest. The motion was approved.

With regard to custodial bids, eight vendors submitted bids for consideration. After these bids were received a vendor on the state bid list contacted the Business Office. We will compare the bids submitted by our vendors with those items on the state bid list and have a comparison ready for a future meeting.

Dr. Scott discussed the FY05 Budget, based on the educational needs of the students. During previous meetings the committee members have approved various items pertaining to the FY05 budget. Dr. Scott has now placed all of the items in one document to present to the committee. The items previously reviewed are as follows:

- Based on projected enrollment all grades will consist of four classes. There is an exception with grade 2, which will consist of three classes.
- With 24 out-of-district SPED placement tuition costs ranging from \$29,000 to & \$196,000 per child this will cost the district a total of \$1.14 million or 16% of the budget next year.
- Math & Reading
 - A math consultant will be hired to work with teachers in all grades.
 - Teachers will be trained in reading assessment.
 - Substitutes will be provided so that teachers can be freed up from their classrooms in order to get support for the math consultant.
 - Curriculum Development stipends will be provided to teachers during summer months so they can work on math & reading.
 - Supplies & materials will be provided totaling \$41,000.
- Heating & Utilities
 - There was a dramatic increase in utilities over what was budgeted. The budgeted amounts were based on architect estimates.
 - Heating increase by approximately \$60,000 and is possibly due to an extremely cold winter and a new building's system not completely regulated or balanced. This is quite possibly a worst case scenario and should not happen again.
 - Utilities have increased by approximately \$40,000. This is most likely due to high electrical costs associated with the lighting of the middle school not regulated. These lights are computer timed and training for the system has not been comprehensive. Both the architect and building committee will need to be notified in order for more training to occur.
- Staff Changes
 - Reductions: Grade 2 teacher, elementary Spanish instructor, art and computer teachers
 - Additions: SPED teacher, part-time custodian, summer custodian, computer assistant to replace retiring computer teacher, school nurse
 - Administrator wage adjustment to bring salaries to bottom of salary wage range for the region
- Technology
 - Purchase printers, software, hardware, internet service, training & support contracts, repairs and computer supplies
 - Total upgrade would be \$173,000

Mr. Muffoletto suggested that money could be cut from the budget by ordering less advanced computers for the younger students. By contacting Dell computers Mr. Prescott found a substantial savings over what was presented to the members. Both gentlemen suggested that there may be other options to consider before moving forward.

In review, the budget is made up of the following: 52% wages, 16% SPED out-of-district placement, 16% high school tuition, 5% custodial/maintenance costs, 5% utilities & 6% other costs.

Dr. Scott stated that with regard to revenue, funding is uncertain and volatile. The state aid from the governor's budget is level funded, same as it is for the current year. Contribution from the town has decreased during the past four years and reminded the committee that in FY03 the school gave back money to help the town balance its budget.

The district generates Medicaid reimbursement revenue. This money is harder to generate as the laws and rules pertaining to it have become more stringent. School choice generates approximately \$500,000 but that figure is based upon the number of children we receive. The state Circuit Breaker, which should cover 75% of SPED placement costs, has been reduced to 35%. There is no way of knowing what the rate will be for next year. The Devens contract generates approximately \$450,000, again based on enrollment. In FY04, grants and donations totaled \$758,000. These will be harder to receive as there are now greater parameters associated with them and they are being given to poorer communities. Local tax contributions have also decreased over the past four years.

Title 1 is anticipated to decrease by 15% with Massachusetts getting the greatest decrease in the country. There is the possibility of no carryover funds available for carryover, a stark contrast to the \$462,000 carried over from FY03. Mr. Muffoletto asked how much money was expected to be carried over at this time last year. Mrs. Stern will need to look into that and have that information available at a later date. Dr. Scott stated that after the FY03 budget had been formalized more money than was expected was given to the district in October 2003.

Given all the above information the FY05 budget is expected to increase by \$928,000 over the FY04 budget and breaks down as follows: 37% SPED tuition/High School tuition costs, 12% heating & utilities, 9% technology, 6% custodial/maintenance, 4% supplies & materials, 4% professional development & 28% salaries and other expenses.

A Public Hearing and Open House has been set for March 23, 2004 at Shirley Middle School. The budget will be the focus of the hearing. Dr. Scott stated that both he & the school committee have an obligation to present a budget that best meets the needs of the students. The committee can make its decision on the budget after the hearing. Mike Smith, FinCom representative, was asked what his recommendation would be for the budget. Mr. Smith stated that a level funded budget proposal would be the FinCom's recommendation.

A special meeting will be held on March 15, 2004 to review different budget scenarios prior to the Public Hearing. This meeting will be held at the Town Offices.

Mr. Walsh reviewed a new SPED program that would partner with Ayer and bring at least one out-of-district placement student back to Shirley. This program would be offered to middle school children and provide life skills and vocational training. It would be open to at least six children from each district and most likely be held at Shirley Middle School. The children would be disciplined according to the hosting district and each student would be claimed for reporting purposes by their own district. The program would slightly decrease tuition costs during the first year of operation. Once the program has been established it may be offered to additional communities for a fee. Mr. Bourassa motioned to approve the program, providing that Ayer accepts the program as well. Mr. Muffoletto seconded the motion. The motion was approved.

Dr. Scott informed the committee of the following information:

- Senator Resor and Representative Eldridge will visit the May 11, 2004 school committee meeting

- “Dare to Parent” program will be facilitated by Susan Foster, school psychologist, on March 16 at the SMS auditorium
- Read Across America will coincide with Dr. Suess’s 100th Birthday celebration on March 2
- Both LAW and SMS will host a “Bring a Buddy/Guest to Lunch” where students can invite someone to join them for lunch
- 1st Annual Invitational Basketball Tournament will take place March 12-14 at SMS gymnasium
- An update was presented on the Mass Cultural Council and Audubon grant

Public Participation:

Bill Higgins, building committee member, suggested that the local cable access channel (SPACO) be present at the Public Hearing. It was also suggested that notices be sent out to the various town boards to invite them to the hearing. Local churches should also be notified. Another suggestion was made to invite local senior citizens to a lunch at SMS. Mr. Muffoletto, speaking as a parent, would like the school to stop sending kids to Nature’s classroom in March. He feels that perhaps late spring may be a better choice as this year the children were subjected to snow and cold weather.

A motion was made by Mr. Bourassa to adjourn the meeting at 9:00 p.m. Mr. Prescott seconded. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by:
Karen Gutheil